

**Testimony of the Reverend Dennis Sparks,
Executive Director,
West Virginia Council of Churches
Before the
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public
Lands**

February 26, 2008

Chairman Grijalva and Members of the Subcommittee, I am the Reverend Dennis Sparks, Executive Director of the West Virginia Council of Churches. I am pleased to testify before you today in support of H.R. 5151, the "Wild Monongahela: A National Legacy for West Virginia's Special Places." My task today is to offer a faith perspective and foundation for the establishment of the Wilderness classification.

The West Virginia Council of Churches' mission "is to make more visible the unity of Christ's church, provide a Christian witness on public issues, and engage in cooperative mission and service for all West Virginians." As one of the oldest institutions in the state of West Virginia, we trace our origins to 1880 and our roots to the 1820s. In the time between 1880 and the present, the work of a few volunteers has blossomed into a cooperative Christian mission and service for all West Virginians.

The membership of the Council of Churches currently includes 14 church denominations in the state, whose membership rolls approach 600,000. Respecting the traditions of each denomination - while uniting to speak with one voice and to act with united hands - we carry the justice message of faith into the public arena. Over the years, the West Virginia Council of Churches has been active in areas of social justice, children's health, economic, environmental and statewide legislative issues, interfaith dialogue and cooperation, as well as service programs in disaster recovery. We are currently through our "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon" program, organizing support for our military families.

As an expression of our interest in and concern for the health of the environment in West Virginia, the Council acted in 2006 to endorse the Wilderness recommendations of the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition (WVWC). It is our belief that each of the 15 special wild areas identified by the WVWC ultimately deserves to be permanently protected by Congress for the benefit of current and future generations as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Our support of these Wilderness recommendations has taken many forms in recent years. We publicly co-sponsored the booklet and later the DVD, "God's Gift of a Wild and Wonderful Land, A Christian Declaration on the Spiritual Values of West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest," which was released to the public in 2006. This document carefully outlined the many spiritual values and lessons that wilderness can provide. As Jesus often drew apart to wild places to pray, we recognize the continuing power and importance to the human spirit of our remaining wild lands. In recognition of

(Dennis Sparks, House Natural Resources Subcommittee, February 26, 2008)

these spiritual values, "God's Gift of a Wild and Wonderful Land" also contained a clear call by many of West Virginia's Christian faith leaders for greater care for creation and for the protection of additional wilderness in our beautiful state. For the Council of Churches this has been and still is an issue of justice that calls for a balance of the natural beauty of creation with the responsibility of human dominion over the earth.

The Council of Churches has also expressed support for wilderness in correspondence to the Monongahela National Forest during its forest planning process and in recent statements in the West Virginia press. Today, as an additional response to our stewardship call to protect God's creation, I would like to express the support of the West Virginia Council of Churches for the "Wild Monongahela" legislation, H.R. 5151.

Perhaps some here today are wondering why the West Virginia faith community would care about wilderness protection for the Monongahela National Forest. In fact, many of my West Virginia colleagues and fellow Christians have long found spiritual inspiration in our beautiful national forest. As co-founder of Christians for the Mountains, Bob Marshall, noted in a February, 2007 column in the Charleston Gazette:

"An Arizona pastor tells of asking his congregation, "When have you felt closest to God?" and reports that they rarely answer, "During your sermons." Like them, many of us here in West Virginia find some of our most profound spiritual experiences in the greatest cathedral of them all -- in solitude beside the still waters or in a deep forest lit by sunlight dappled through the forest canopy. Or, here in the Monongahela National Forest, beside the not-so-still waters of a gloriously wild, rushing mountain stream."

Bob Marshall's article provides an eloquent testimony on behalf of additional wilderness protection for West Virginia's wonderful wild lands. I have included it at the end of my written statement and request that it be made part of the official record of this hearing.

The Council of Churches asks that the areas identified in H.R. 5151 should be allowed to remain untouched by development and stand as permanently protected natural cathedrals. Preserving these special areas is a form of tithing, setting apart some of the natural bounty that the Creator has given us as a wild sanctuary and protecting it in its undefiled natural condition. We are convinced that only permanent, strong protection afforded by Wilderness designation can ensure that the solitude and closeness to God's creation in nature will still be available in West Virginia for all citizens of this great American land to enjoy. If these areas are not moved into permanent protective designations, the possibility for future disruption from logging operations, off-road vehicles and other uses will always be present.

Our support for this legislation, and our underlying support for Wilderness protection, is based on our shared beliefs that 1) our forests and wild lands are part of God's creation, 2) Wilderness, if protected, provides a number of important spiritual and natural

(Dennis Sparks, House Natural Resources Subcommittee, February 26, 2008)

benefits, and 3) we have a stewardship responsibility for protecting our forests and wilderness resources on Earth.

God's Creation

As Psalm 24:1 proclaims, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and all that dwell in it." In the Biblical story of creation, trees are the emblem of the living earth and Adam and Eve first encountered creation through two trees – the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. In Genesis (1:12), God proclaimed the goodness of trees and other plant life which he had created. You are invited to capture the moment: "The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with seed in it. And God saw that it was good." As Romans (1:20) explains, "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." In our present world, as this passage from Romans reminds us that, trees are not only crucial components of a healthy environment, they are living symbols of the many good gifts that God has given us -- including clean streams, fresh air, bountiful fish and wildlife habitats, and sources of spiritual inspiration.

Spiritual Values of Wilderness

Upon reflection, we see that there are many spiritual values and lessons that can be gained in the Wilderness. "God's Gift of a Wild and Wonderful Land" explored the faith values provided by protected wilderness areas and explained why such areas are important from a Christian perspective. Among the many key aspects of wilderness, the declaration noted that:

- **In wilderness we learn about God.** When we leave the crowds of town and city and enter the quiet and peace of wild places, the deep questions of human life rise to the surface.
- **Wilderness is God's gift of creation undefiled.** Without wilderness, we lose a reminder of what creation is like in its pristine condition. The clean air, the cold water, the quiet of trees, the moist earth and everything in between help us to clarify our thinking so that we can open to God and the nature of creation.
- **Wilderness teaches humility.** The mountains are big and we are small. Surrounded by wildness, we experience God's immense creation as majestic yet intricate in its uncountable details.

In centuries past, people of the Judeo-Christian heritage as well people of other ancient faiths had a strong understanding of the spiritual values to be found in the wilderness. In Hebrew tradition Moses lead the Israelites into the wilderness; from the Christian

(Dennis Sparks, House Natural Resources Subcommittee, February 26, 2008)

experience, Jesus went to the wilderness to prepare for his ministry. The saints went to the wilderness to find a deeper experience of God. For many of us today, protected Wilderness areas and other wild forests provide us that precious – and ever more elusive -- opportunity to, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Stewardship

Before the Flood, Noah and his family protected at least two of every animal species. After the Flood, God said to Noah, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you, of the birds, of the cattle, and of every wild animal of the earth with you” (Genesis 9:9). As we read these and other biblical passages, we see that our religious heritage calls us to be good stewards of the Creator’s magnificent creation.

With respect to the protection of our forests and our state’s environment, we see that the choices originally presented by two trees to Adam and Eve are still choices before us today. It is through our trees of forest that we will choose life and may perhaps know the difference between good and evil. We can choose to honor the Creator and respect the creation and the integrity of the good earth, or we can follow the path of exploitation and loss. As the Reverend Billy Graham has said, “It is not right for us to destroy the world that God has given us...We Christians have a responsibility to take the lead in the caring for the earth.”

Conclusion

The words of the Psalmist (1:3) compared the pursuit of happiness as the “trees planted by streams of living water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do they prosper.” In short, we believe that it is both our ecological and economic opportunity and moral duty as people of faith to safeguard our Wilderness resources and forest wild lands. This safeguard relates to a now famous line found in President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address: “God’s work must truly be our own.” As one author stated in response to the President, “More importantly, in an era of heightened human impact upon the entire planet, our own work must truly be God’s” (Earth Community Earth Ethics, Larry L. Rasmussen, 1996, page 293).

As an area of federal land belonging to all Americans, the Monongahela National Forest can uniquely provide opportunities for reflection and inspiration that are becoming ever scarcer in our rapidly modernizing and developing world. We believe that carefully protecting this wonderful national forest and its Wilderness-quality lands not only has a sound biblical foundation, but is also the best and most practical course of action for safeguarding the beauty, abundance, and ecological health of the world which we will pass along to our children’s children.

We thank the Chairman and other members of the West Virginia delegation for their good efforts and share in the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition's hope to see the bill strengthened before it is passed with additional protection for other critical areas that are part of the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition's proposal. Thank you for considering our testimony today.

The Charleston Gazette

Wilderness: God's greatest cathedral

2 / 18 / 2007

However much time you and I spend in our churches, my guess is that like me, you find that a particularly fitting place to commune with your God is in His own wilderness.

An Arizona pastor tells of asking his congregation, "When have you felt closest to God?" and reports that they rarely answer, "During your sermons." Like them, many of us here in West Virginia find some of our most profound spiritual experiences in the greatest cathedral of them all -- in solitude beside the still waters or in a deep forest lit by sunlight dappled through the forest canopy. Or, here in the Monongahela National Forest, beside the not-so-still waters of a gloriously wild, rushing mountain stream such as Seneca Creek.

As a Christian who reads the Bible regularly, I know that the greatest prophets sought the wildest places in nature for their most intense spiritual renewal. Moses convened with God on Sinai for "forty days and forty nights" (Exodus 24:18). And Mark tells us that Jesus sojourned in the wilderness for "forty days" (Mark 1:13). In short, wilderness is part of our Biblical heritage.

The Lord, I believe, did not place us in this earthly garden to see us despoil every part of it, or to turn every acre to our immediate needs for food, fiber and money. There is a deep inborn reason that our hearts respond with a joyous leap to great vistas of unspoiled nature. His Creation as He created it.

This is why I am working through my organization, Christians for the Mountains, and religious leaders in our state, including the West Virginia Council of Churches, to encourage our members of Congress to protect additional areas of wilderness. Thanks to the visionary and bipartisan Wilderness Act that Congress passed in 1964, we have the means through our democratic process to see that a reasonable sample of the wilderness solitudes of the Monongahela National Forest will be preserved for all time to serve many values, not least being our spiritual needs.

For us, this is an act of humility. Surely it would be immoral for our generation to deny future generations of West Virginians what the Wilderness Act terms "the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness." Our obligation to them, and to our Creator, runs deeper. Preserving wilderness areas such as Seneca Creek, Spice Run and the Dolly Sods Expansion, is a form of tithing, setting apart some of the natural bounty given to us as a wild sanctuary, protecting it in its undefiled natural condition for the benefit of generations unborn.

So, we ask our elected officials to take a political action in a nonpartisan way. We ask them to preserve more of the wilderness of the Mon. Far into the future our descendants in these mountains will lift their eyes unto the hills. They will need and treasure these quiet reserves of God's wild solitudes so much more in their crowded world than we can even imagine.

The great Republican Teddy Roosevelt spoke of our obligation to the future, railing against "the shortsighted men who in their greed and selfishness will, if permitted, rob our country of half its charm by their reckless extermination of all useful and beautiful wild things."

The "greatest good for the greatest number," Roosevelt reminds us, "applies to the number within the womb of time, compared to which those now alive form but an insignificant fraction. Our duty to the whole, including the unborn generations, bids us restrain" ourselves "from wasting the heritage of these unborn generations." I personally want to know that my four grandchildren, and their children, will be afforded the same opportunity to experience the awe-inspiring wild places we seek to protect.

Today, you and I bear this moral responsibility to those within the womb of time. Yes, we could develop the remaining unprotected wild places in our national forest if we chose to; that decision is in our hands. But in a very real way, all those yet unborn are watching us, praying (as writer Terry Tempest Williams so eloquently puts it) "for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with clasped hands hoping that we might act with restraint."

We humans live only by grace, and Williams reminds us that it is within our legislative powers — held by our elected representatives — to take care that a good, big, generous sample of God's wilderness lives on as well. Wilderness areas such as Cranberry Glades and Dolly Sods that Congress has already protected in this way, offer places to play in, to be sure, for hunters, fishermen, campers and hikers, young families, and sturdy mountaineers who remain young at heart.

And, for many of us, wilderness offers the very best places in which to pray.

[Bob Marshall, of Kenna, is a native West Virginian, avid fly fisherman, hunter and a practicing veterinarian. He co-founded Christians for the Mountains, and helps lead the Religious Campaign for Wilderness. For information about citizen wilderness proposals, visit www.wwild.org.]